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Opening extract from

Bombmaker

Written by

Claire McFall

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CHAPTER ONE

My lips were dry, the moisture sucked out of them by the ragged gasping of my breathing as it struggled to keep up with the frantic pounding of my heart. I didn't lick them, impeded by the flashlight clenched tightly between my teeth, held there because both my hands were busy. In my right hand I gripped a block of putty the size of a pack of playing cards; in my left, a blue wire, the gleaming copper ends glinting like flame in the narrow beam of the torch. Carefully, hesitantly, I eased the sharpened points deep into the block of explosive, then I raised my fingers three inches and gripped the tiny switch. Offering up a prayer to no one, I flicked the lever from left to right. A red light blinked on.

I sighed, feeling relief wash through me.

As delicately as I could manage, I lifted the device and slotted it neatly beneath a jumble of motherboards and hard drives. Then I checked each connection, each wire, each switch. Everything had to be perfect; everything had to be right. As a last touch, I pushed a discreet

button, and the tiny black box emitted a single shrill beep. I looked at my watch. 11.27 p.m.

Job done, I lifted the heavy metal panel door of the servers unit and slotted it back into place. The sharp edges made a loud grating sound as they slid into position and I froze, listening. Only the whirring of the air conditioning unit kept me company. Satisfied my presence was still unnoticed, I quickly screwed the bolts back in, hiding my handiwork within the depths of the computer. The red light was just visible through the vent near the base, but nobody was going to be looking that closely. Not tonight. Not in the next twenty minutes. I snapped off the flashlight and plunged myself into darkness before I got off my knees.

Now to get out without attracting attention. CCTV cameras were fitted in every room, the overhead lights set with motion detectors. Even the most inept security guard couldn't fail to notice if a hallway suddenly lit up when nobody was supposed to be there. There was an alarm on every window and every exterior door. A bit of a pickle for someone working alone. Luckily I was not.

I flipped out my mobile and dialled the only stored number. Someone answered after just one ring.

"Hello?" A detached male voice spoke, the crackling of the line didn't quite mask his thick Welsh accent.

"I'm done."

"Give me a minute and a half."

The dial tone rang in my ear before the last word had fully formed.

Snapping the clamshell closed, I eased the phone back into my pocket and counted slowly to ninety in my head. Then I lifted the hood of my jumper and eased it over my hair, pulling it forward until it hung low, half concealing my face. I walked straight out of the door and along the corridor towards the lift.

The overhead fluorescents buzzed into life, banishing the shadows of the darkened building and lighting my way. I ignored the waiting lift and took the stairwell, jogging lightly down several floors until I reached ground level. A heavy fire door spat me out into a foyer, cavernous and sparkling white. Strolling forward, I jumped over the low turnstiles where daytime workers swiped their government IDs, letting the long sleeves of my top cover my fingers as I leaned on the pillars to leapfrog; then I marched past the empty security reception, out through the front door.

A car was waiting for me at the roadside, gleaming black in the pool of light from the wide open entranceway. I opened the passenger door, pausing to look at a noisy kerfuffle happening a little way along the street. Several security guards were struggling to contain a group of youths armed with spray cans and baseball bats. I smiled. How convenient for me.

"Get in," a low voice ordered from within the vehicle.

I did as the man said, and as soon as I closed the door the car ghosted away. I fastened my seat belt as we turned left at the end of the road, joining a steady stream of traffic. Even at this time of night the city centre

remained congested, providing plenty of cover for us to disappear, should any prying eyes be watching.

"Any problems?"

In the yellow glare of the streetlights I stared at the silhouette of my driver, Samuel. He looked straight ahead, his eyes darting from vehicle to vehicle, hunting for the red and black markings of a GE patrol.

"No," I said, my voice hushed.

"How long have we got?"

I twisted my wrist to squint at my watch, the tiny luminous dials winking at me through the darkness.

"About five minutes."

"Plenty of time to clear the scene."

I nodded, but he wasn't paying attention to me. He was on high alert, the same way he always was whenever Alexander made him travel within the Central Zone. He didn't like it here; it was too tightly controlled, too penned in. We were silent as we wound slowly through the maze of gridlocked cars. I wanted to turn on the radio, but Samuel hadn't given me permission and I didn't want to ask. Instead I stared at my watch, following the second hand as it rotated in jerking circles, counting the minutes as they ticked past. I didn't feel it when the clock struck 11.47 p.m., but the sky behind me flashed white then orange in the rear-view mirror.

"Good work, Lizzie," Samuel muttered to me as he passed by the bollards marking the edge of the Zone. "Alex will be pleased."

I didn't say anything. I hoped the security guards

were still outside, dealing with the hired yobs.

We sped up as we crossed the river and made our way into the East End. Traffic was lighter here. Most people didn't have the money for cars or, more specifically, petrol. Besides, it wasn't the sort of area where it was safe to be out after dark. Stop-and-grabs were widespread, and it was common for drivers to ignore red lights at junctions. No one was likely to interfere with our car, however. They knew better.

Samuel pulled up outside a large tenement building. It had been a block of flats, but Alexander had bought them all and then converted the place into one huge four-storey mansion. On the outside it was as tatty and rundown as any of the other buildings on the street, but inside it was the central hub of his empire, testament to how his business had grown. And he was doing very well.

We got out of the car and a young lackey appeared immediately to take the keys from Samuel.

"Wipe it, strip it, sell it," Samuel told him.

Then he clapped me on the shoulder and guided me inside. I felt a familiar knot tie itself in my stomach. We were going to see Alexander.

The door was opened for us before we reached it, a great hulking figure nodding curtly to Samuel, one hand on a bulge in his leather jacket. He was the gatekeeper, the man who decided whether or not you got in; and if you did, whether you went up, down or straight ahead. Business transactions happened on the ground floor, dodgy dealings in the basement. Only 'family' went upstairs.

Those special few who made it into Alexander's inner circle.

We headed straight for the staircase, making for the first floor where Alexander kept his private office. It wasn't so much an office as a vast open space housing everything a gangster might need, and quite a few things he probably never would. There was a stainless steel, state-of-the-art kitchen area, which housed more booze than food; a pool table; a giant flat screen attached to the wall; several luxurious white leather sofas; a corner bedecked with office furniture and, half hidden behind a screen, a king-sized bed. The whole room was opulent and decadent, and I hated the place.

"You made the news," Alexander said as soon as we entered, pressing a button on the remote so that the television sprang to life. "A special broadcast. It interrupted *Detective Plum*."

I looked at the screen, trying hard to keep my face impassive. A female reporter stood to the left of the shot, mouthing silently into the camera. Over her right shoulder, flames and smoke billowed from a grand stone building, the government logo just visible beneath the flashing blue lights of the emergency services. Ticker tape running along the bottom of the screen announced that police suspected terrorists were involved in the bombing of the Home Office Information building.

They were right to suspect.

"I knew I could trust my Elizabeth," he said softly, rolling off the sofa and crossing the room towards us. His walk was like a cat, stealthy and lithe. He came

right up to me and placed his hands on either side of my face. "Clever girl," he kissed me full on the lips. My mouth tingled at the same time as my stomach clenched with fear.

Then he dropped his hands and turned to his brother, dismissing me. I stared at the two of them: so similar, so very, very different. The Evans brothers. Both were on the short side of average, both had green eyes and brown hair, both spoke with lilting Welsh accents. But, whereas Samuel was lean and wiry in a tough way, Alexander, mindful of the fact that his brother was a full inch taller, had worked his muscles till they bulked out, and the broadness of his chest and shoulders was clear beneath the designer-cut suit he wore. Alexander also had the first hint of lines etching into the corners of his mouth; at twenty-eight he was four years older than his brother. But the main difference was that Samuel had the intricate, symmetrical knot tattooed on his left cheek, whereas Alexander's cheek was beautifully smooth, lasered clean.

Alexander was also a hell of a lot meaner.

"Any problems?"

Samuel shook his head. "She went in; all the stuff was there, where it should have been; she set up the bomb; then we created a distraction to get her out. Simple. And it all went like clockwork."

Alexander nodded, twisting one side of his mouth up into a satisfied smile. He liked it when things went like clockwork. So did I; because when they didn't, someone invariably ended up visiting Zane in the basement and they

were never seen again. Zane was Alexander's personal bodyguard, but he also dealt with employees who had to be 'despatched' from the payroll. He was here now, lingering discreetly on one of the sofas, alert blue eyes watching everything that went on. His posture was relaxed, but I knew that if I raised my hand to take a swing at Alexander, he'd be across the room and I'd be face down in the thick shag of the carpet, my arm dislocated up my back, before my palm made contact with Alexander's cheek. That, or he'd just shoot me. But then Alexander would be annoyed; he didn't like blood in his office.

"And the car?"

"We'll get rid of it, after it's been cleaned down. Nobody saw us, but that doesn't mean the police won't go through the CCTV for the street. We'll probably have to take a loss on it."

Alexander made a face. He didn't like making losses either.

"We should have used something older, a cheap car."

Samuel shook his head.

"Bad idea, Alex. It would have looked out of place in that part of town. We'd have been stopped by a GE patrol before we got anywhere near."

I tried not to smile as Alexander nodded in rueful agreement. Samuel was the only one who dared to argue with his brother, he was also the only person who could get away with calling him Alex. Alexander didn't shorten names. That's why I was Elizabeth to him, and Lizzie to everyone else.

"You're sure there will be nothing to tie this to us?"

Samuel nodded.

"Lizzie kept her face out of the cameras; no one will be able to identify her."

"Gloves?"

Both brothers looked to me. I paled. Samuel had told me to wear gloves, had made a point of handing them to me. And I'd deliberately left them in the car. Samuel wasn't going to tell on me, but he wasn't going to take the heat for it either.

"I can't work with gloves on," I said, my strangled whisper barely audible above the sound of four people quietly breathing. "My fingers slip."

Alexander's face darkened.

"If you've left fingerprints…"

"I haven't!" I stammered. "I didn't touch anything, only the gear. I swear. Even when I was taking the panel on and off, I covered my hands with my sleeves." I held up my arms, hidden beneath the overlong fabric of my hoodie, as proof.

"I sincerely hope so," Alexander said softly.

My pulse broke into a sprint, dewy sweat forming at the base of my back. Alexander didn't shout, ever. Someone who had to bellow and bawl had lost control, and Alexander never, ever lost control. In any case, there was never any need for him to raise his voice, because whenever he opened his mouth to speak, everyone shut the hell up and listened. But when he was quiet, when his voice dropped to the low murmur of a lover, that was

when he was most dangerous. That was when your life hung in the balance. I knew if my name cropped up in the police investigation – and if it did, even if it was only mentioned once, in passing, Alexander would know about it – then I would be taking a trip with Zane. I saw him now, out of the corner of my eye, smiling at me.

Three sharp raps sounded. I jumped, and we all turned towards the door. We waited, but the door didn't open. Whoever was outside knew well enough that entry to Alexander's office was strictly by invitation only – unless you were Samuel.

"Zane."

Though Alexander was only feet from the door, he turned and looked at his bodyguard. It was part of the charade, after all. What sort of gangster opened his own door?

Zane got up and breezed past us, shielding the room with his body as he opened the door. No bullet was getting through the thickness of his bulk to take his boss by surprise.

I tried to listen to his low conversation, but nothing audible drifted my way. After a few seconds, Zane clicked the door quietly closed and crossed to where we stood. He leaned close, whispered a few words in Alexander's ear. I saw Alexander's eyes narrow, then widen in warning and reproach as he caught me watching, unduly interested.

"I see," he said, still staring at me.

Raising his right hand to my face, his fingers traced lightly around the tattoo on my cheek. I forced myself to

hold his gaze.

"I have some business to take care of downstairs. Elizabeth, why don't you go and make yourself comfortable."

It wasn't a suggestion.

I stared at him, mutinous. I knew exactly what he wanted me to do, but Zane and Samuel were still in the room. It was a test, a vindictive game; just one more opportunity for Alexander to remind me that I belonged to him.

I did belong to him.

Turning on my heel, I made my way slowly towards the bed. Mindful of three pairs of eyes on me, my cheeks burned as I stripped off my hoodie and T-shirt as I walked. The rest of my clothes I shrugged off behind the screen. Then I crawled into his bed to wait.

CHAPTER TWO

Lying on my back, I stared at myself. Two cold grey eyes stared back. They were framed by thick, dark lashes, and stood out in a pinched, snowy-white face. My hair was a mess, the short pixie cut ruffled and sticking up at odd angles. In my nose and running up the sides of both ears, silver and diamanté studs glittered in the spotlights Alexander's interior designer had installed along with the mirrored ceiling. The lights lit up every angle of my androgynous frame; and my face, with its set, hardened expression that was much too worldly-wise for my eighteen years. It was a hard face to look at.

Trailing my eyes down, I gazed at the arm flung across my stomach. Against my pallid skin it looked tanned, the muscles huge, the bicep almost as thick as my waist. It was heavy, pinning me down. At first glance it might have seemed the embrace of a lover, but it wasn't. Alexander lay on his front, his face turned away from me. His arm around me was nothing more than a possessive gesture: I was not allowed to move until he said so.

I was his. Not his wife, or his girlfriend. I was something he owned, like the building, or the sleek silver Jaguar he drove, or the collection of expensive watches laid out on a shelf in the dressing room, cleverly concealed behind the bed. In fact, I was less than that, because he cared a great deal more for his fancy toys than he did for me. But he had total and utter control over every aspect of my life. He dictated where I went, what I did, who I spoke to. I did nothing without permission, and I knew with total certainty that it would be up to him to decide when it was time for me to die.

Because if it wasn't for him, I would be dead already.

When the global economy collapsed, the world as we knew it changed overnight. China and the USA were at each other's throats, with Europe caught in the crossfire. Germany and France were pushing hard for laws and policies that would reel Britain in, make her a slave. So we left the EU. We'd been persuaded, in desperation, into taking the Euro, but we soon came out of it again, and tried to go it alone. It didn't work very well. After just five years the country was bankrupt, the people starving. The government in London made the decision to dissolve the United Kingdom, to make it every Englishman for himself. They cut off Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales – built great cement and steel structures that put the Berlin Wall to shame. And they cast out the Celts – sent us back to our hills and our heather and our empty pockets. The law was simple: any Celt caught in England without a visa

was tattooed – a Celtic knot, on the left cheek where it was impossible to hide – and then sent back home. Any Celt caught in England without a visa and with a tattoo, was shot. No trial, no mercy.

I was caught by the GE, the Government Enforcers, for the first time when I was sixteen. I wasn't homeless, but I was sleeping on the street, just for that night. I had a job, working in a little café, but I'd run out of cash and I couldn't pay the rent on the cupboard-sized bedsit I was living in, so I was out. But only for one night – one single night. I'd get my wages the next day, pay what I owed, and have a roof back over my head, even if it was a leaky one. All I had to do was survive a few hours of darkness. I found myself a semi-dry doorway, spread my jacket out over my knees, and prepared to try to sleep, the rucksack containing all my important possessions hugged tight to my chest.

I didn't even have time to get uncomfortable.

"What's this then? You can't sleep here, love. Come on, up you get."

A strong hand hooked under my arm and pulled me up onto my feet. A middle-aged man with a bushy grey moustache and a GE uniform looked at me, not unkindly, as I dusted myself off. His partner, however, was scowling at me, like I was a rat that had crawled out of a drain.

"Where's your ID card?" he snapped.

I didn't have one.

"I haven't got all day. Where's your ID card?"

I just stared at him, eyes begging for mercy. The one with the moustache sighed sadly. His partner crowed with unconcealed delight.

"Well, well, well. I think we've got ourselves a Celt!"

He slapped cuffs on me, hustled me out of the alleyway and forced me into the back of a waiting GE van. From there I was taken to a police station, where an officer swabbed the inside of my cheek and ran me through the database. No hits. Not English.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"Glasgow," I muttered. There was no point lying, not now.

"So why didn't you leave?"

We'd all been told to get out, given ninety days to make our way back to our 'homelands'. You could apply for a visa, if you'd lived in England long enough, but I hadn't, and I wouldn't have had the money or the skills to pass the Home Office's twenty checks anyway. There were no appeals, there was no asylum.

I shrugged.

"You know, the people in this country can't afford to pay for everyone," she went on.

I stared at her. She was one of *them*: the people who thought the government had got it right. The people who were quite happy to cut off millions and see them living in poverty and squalor like some Third World country.

She frowned, annoyed that I wouldn't respond, wouldn't apologise for my existence.

"How old are you?"

I glowered at her, then answered the question she was really asking.

"Old enough."

Twelve. That was the age limit they'd set, the age at which you were deemed old enough to be responsible for the fact you were standing in a country that no longer wanted you. The age at which you could be scarred for life. Just twelve.

She grunted in response.

"Come with me. You're lucky, you'll not have to wait long today."

I didn't have to wait at all. Tattoo Room 3 was empty. I was escorted in, handcuffed to the chair, and a thick leather strap was tied across my forehead to keep my head still. A pointless exercise: who was going to weave their head about when a man was coming at their face with a needle?

It was the most painful thing I had experienced, up until that point at least. The design was intricate, beautiful really. A Celtic knot. It was something I wouldn't have minded having on my hip or my shoulder, something to remind me of home. If I'd had a choice. I would *not* have chosen to have it burned into my face.

They left me to cry myself to sleep in a police cell overnight, then in the morning I was put on a bus with about thirty others and we were driven back up north. Soldiers at the border conducted us through a tunnel, then simply let us go. Like animals released into the wild, we were expected just to survive. Never mind that there

was little in the way of government in Scotland any more, and absolutely no welfare state. There were no jobs, no money, no food. No chances.

As soon as I could, I got myself back down to England, buying my way with my looks, my smile and my body, catching a lift with a rich businessman with no morals and a big boot. Once we got to London he went his way and I went mine, and I survived. I slept rough, I tried to get a job, but it was harder this time. I'd been marked. Nobody wanted the GE raiding their business, so they wouldn't take the risk. Without money, there were few places indoors to hide. It was only a matter of time before they caught me; and this time, when they did, I was dead.

It was raining on the night that should have been my last. Raining hard, the drops bounced off the concrete, driven faster by the strong wind. I was walking; not going anywhere, just walking. It was too wet to bunk down, and by keeping moving I could at least stay warm. Trouble was, seventeen-year-old girls on the street, at night, on their own, attracted things. Like men: driving past in cars, spilling out of pubs. They'd erupt from the gutter to catcall and paw, grabbing a handful if they thought they could get away with it. The seedier the area, the worse it got. You could head for the safety of the Central Zone, for the GE, but it was a balancing act. Too far out from the city centre and you were walking into trouble, too close and you were walking into worse.

I was definitely flirting with danger, weaving my way through the bollards that marked out the Zone, but I'd

had a bad night. A man had actually stopped, got out of his car and tried to drag me inside. I'd screamed for help, but no one wanted so much as to look out of their windows, so I'd had to defend myself. I'd kicked him, hard, and then I'd run. I was fine, but I was shaken, and I was in no hurry to repeat the experience. So I moved towards the lights and the CCTV of the Central Zone.

They probably saw me on one of the cameras positioned at every corner. I had my hood up, to keep off the rain, but more importantly to hide my face. It must have looked suspicious, because the next street I turned into, the GE patrol car was waiting for me. Two doors opened, two officers stepped out. One spoke into the radio pinned to his chest.

"We've got her. Yeah, I can see it from here. Going to be a Code Six. Send round a van."

I could guess easily enough what that meant. It was time to do some more running.

All GE officers carry guns. They claim it's for protection, but in reality it's so that they can dish out the swift, final judgement and sentence on any Celts they catch, so there's no time for pleas or trials or true justice. I knew as soon as I tried to run they were allowed to gun me down in the street, they didn't have to take me to the station and put me down in the sanitary, humane way. I was dead either way, but if I bolted, there was the smallest chance I could outrun a bullet.

"Don't!" one of them warned, seeing the thought on my face as if it were written on my forehead. He stepped

forward, right hand reaching to his side, fingers fumbling with the catch of his holster. I glimpsed a flash of dark grey, the shining length of a barrel, and then I was gone.

I sprinted back the way I'd come, weaving and dancing, keeping myself close to expensive cars or large windows, knowing they wouldn't want to shoot, miss, and risk causing major damage to something belonging to somebody important. It was that sort of neighbourhood. But even uptown has its alleyways, its narrow back lanes where rats scuttle and dodgy deals are done, and that's where I was heading. Somewhere dark; somewhere someone small could disappear.

I kicked down just such an alleyway as one of the GEs decided he had a clear shot. The bullet whipped past me, slamming into the brick wall. Dust flew up in a cloud to my right, sending my already pounding heart into overdrive. I panicked, willing my legs to move faster, willing my lungs to keep working. I was barely looking where I was going, just concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other, as quickly as possible. So when I hit the man standing in the darkest depths of the passage, I took him down.

We sprawled on the ground, limbs entwining, his back scraping along the concrete floor for several feet. The impact knocked my breath from my lungs and snapped my neck, sending a jolt down my back like I'd broken my spine. Two arms, his, grabbed me, held me there, while both of us tried to work out what had just happened.

That wasn't Alexander. Alexander was standing in the

shadow of a doorway, right where I'd fallen, halfway through concluding a drug deal with the stranger I'd inadvertently attacked. His sharp eyes quickly took in the tattoo, clearly visible on my cheek now that my hood had fallen down, and the two GE officers chasing me. Without hesitating, he stepped out into their path, lifted his hand, and shot both men in the chest. There was no explosion, no crack of gunfire, just two hollow pops as the bullets burst out of his silencer. I watched them drop, astounded.

Then I turned to him just as he turned to me.

If I thought I'd met my saviour, I was sadly mistaken. Alexander had been protecting himself, the wad of money for the bag of cocaine he'd just handed over was burning a hole in his pocket. If the GE had caught him, he'd have been tattooed, jailed, maybe even executed. No, he wasn't rescuing me; he was looking out for his own interests. And making sure I never opened my mouth about this was definitely in his interest. He considered me for the length of a heartbeat, then lifted the gun again.

"No!" I managed to find my voice. "No, please. Please."

I was staring into death.

"Christ, shoot her, Alex. I think she's broken my wrist."

So he fired. He pulled the trigger, sent a bullet flying through the air at a thousand miles an hour.

But he didn't shoot me.

The low-ranking dealer should have known better than to shorten his boss's name.

Alexander picked me up, dragged me down the lane away from the three corpses lying in puddles of rainwater

and their own blood, and stuck me in the passenger seat of his car. Then he drove off, taking me out of danger. Into hell.

From that minute on, he owned me.

I sighed and closed my eyes, wondering if there was any chance of more sleep, but the clock inlaid into the wall said 7.57 a.m., and Alexander always woke up at eight, without an alarm and without fail. I had to get up then, too. By nine, we'd be joined by Zane and any other business associates Alexander was trying to smarm by inviting them to his private office. A buxom blonde in his bed might send off the right signals; but me, I was just untidy.

"Elizabeth."

I opened my eyes, and he was staring at me. He didn't smile; Alexander rarely smiled, unless he was about to punish someone. He just stared – green eyes seeing right through me – as if he could see my soul. He was a very hard man to lie to, that was one of the reasons he was so successful. He knew when people weren't telling the truth, or when they were feeling guilty. If someone was on the take, or trying to play both sides, trying to get one over on him, Alexander would be onto them like lightning. And they'd be dead.

"I need you to make a few deliveries today," he said.

Deliveries. That was how I'd started out my career working for Alexander. Dropping off and picking up. I'd been good at it, too. I asked no questions and I did what

I was told. I didn't do drugs, so I was never tempted to open up the mysterious brown packages handed to me and help myself to a sample, and I wasn't the average drug runner. The police weren't looking for a girl who looked like she should still be in school. I was able to slip in unnoticed where big, mean men would set alarm bells ringing. More importantly, I knew I had to do well, or he'd decide I wasn't useful any more.

"Okay," I replied. I hesitated. "Are they daylight deliveries?"

"Yes."

I didn't wince, but my heart sank. I hated going out in the daylight. The tattoo was impossible to hide; that was, after all, the whole point of it.

I bit my lip and decided that, since it was the morning and he seemed to be in a reasonable mood, I would push my luck.

"Can I take someone with me?"

He shook his head before I'd even got half my question out.

"No, I want you to keep a low profile."

I nodded, accepting that. I had learned from experience not to argue.

"See Zane. He'll tell you what I need you to do."

Alexander rolled off the bed, leaving me to make a face to myself in the ceiling. Zane would be deliberately difficult. He worshipped Alexander, and although he wasn't a homosexual, sometimes I was sure he wished he could take my place in his master's bed. I would have happily

swapped. He didn't like to speak to me, and he made no secret of that fact that he couldn't understand why Alexander kept me around – though he said nothing to his face of course.

I was right. An hour later, Zane took me downstairs, *way* downstairs, into the basement. He stomped around, his expression making it crystal clear that he thought dealing with me was beneath him.

"Mr Alexander has a very specific job for you," he glowered at me out of the corner of his eye. "He needs you to make a drop off, then you're on cash collection."

"Cash collection?" I echoed, dubious.

"Yes. Cash collection," Zane snapped.

I was surprised. Usually Alexander sent muscle to pick up payments. But more than that, he very rarely sent me out alone any more, and never with any money in my pocket. He didn't want me to get any ideas in my head about disappearing. Perhaps, at last, he'd started to trust me. Or, more likely, this was another of his little tests, upping the ante until he found the one I'd fail.

"Where?"

"The drop off is St Paul's." My breath sucked in: the Central Zone. Zane ignored me. "And the collection is out at Kensington. There's a proper address in the bag, and a change of clothes. Don't use it till you've done the drop off."

Zane dumped a small rucksack on the table in front of me. It was pink and blue, more girlie than anything else I owned. It looked like something a schoolgirl

would wear. I sighed, guessing that was the role I was playing. My eyes flitted to the left, where Zane was unlocking a steel cabinet with a large, jangling collection of keys. Inside was my package.

"This," he said, turning round and holding up a small brown parcel about the size of a brick, "has been weighed accurate to a milligram."

So don't steal any.

Not that I would.

"Who's picking it up?"

He gave an evil grin, and I felt unease bubbling in my stomach.

"It's a man called Riley."

"How will I know him? ID?"

"You'll know." He was smirking like the cat that got the cream. Warning sirens were firing in my brain.

"Zane—"

"He's GE." He dropped the bombshell, then watched my face, waiting to see it fall. I refused to give him the satisfaction, but inside I was quaking. I knew that Alexander had several high-ranking officers from the police and the GE in his pocket; it was how he kept them away from his premises, how most of his deals went unnoticed, unpunished. I'd never met any of them before, or at least, I didn't know if I had. They terrified me. They could shoot me on the spot, my inky cheek the only warrant they would need.

"Fine," I said, forcing my voice not to tremble. "Is there a list for the collections?"

Zane gave me a long look, disappointed in my lack of reaction, then thumped a large book down on the table. He shuffled through until he found the right page, and spun it round to face me. It was a list, about twenty names running down the left-hand column, and then a series of dates along the top of the double page. Various amounts had been crossed out: debt paid. Alexander's books. He didn't trust computers. Computers could be hacked. Every amount was stored in two key places: his head and Zane's. The basement held the third copy, the paper copy. The back up.

I gave the list one more glance. This was my job for today. I reached out and lifted the book, but Zane slammed his hand down, knocking it back to the tabletop. He shook his head. The list didn't leave the basement, apart from in my head.

I memorised all twenty names, and the amounts they owed. It was an odd register. They were all girls, the cash sums paltry in comparison with most of Alexander's deals. That didn't bother me, though. There was less chance of trouble that way. Once I could repeat it by rote for Zane three times without making mistakes, he took me back upstairs, handed me a jacket and a phone.

"What's the number?" I asked.

The mobiles I was given only ever had one telephone number logged into the directory, and that was the only one they could call.

"Mine," Zane said. I grimaced at the floor as I shrugged my way into a tight-fitting denim jacket. "You've got until

four this afternoon," he said, shoving the rucksack into my hands. "Don't make me have to call you."

"Right," I muttered.

"Lizzie?" a voice behind me called my name. It was Samuel.

"She's going out," Zane said curtly, his harsh Northern Irish accent jarring again Samuel's soft Welsh one.

"Where to?"

"St Paul's."

I didn't say anything. I was used to being talked about as if I wasn't there. It was nice to see Samuel make a face when he heard my destination, though. We shared a dislike of the Central Zone.

"Come here," he said, reaching into his inside jacket pocket.

"She's leaving now," Zane protested, putting a hand on my arm when I moved.

Samuel stared at him, and Zane stared back, but only for a moment. Then he dropped his arm, and his head. Zane might be Alexander's right-hand man, his shadow, but Samuel was Alexander's brother. That meant he won the weigh in, just.

I trooped forward, scuffed and tatty Cat boots clumping loudly on the wooden floor. My eyes were on a small jar in his hands.

"You'll need this, if you're going to the Zone," he said, dunking two fingers into a beige cream and smearing it across my skin, over the interwoven lines running a never-ending circle around my cheek. "It's not a perfect match,"

he said, rubbing it in. "You're too pale. But it's better than nothing."

He finished his work, but left his hand against my cheek. His touch was warm against my skin, comforting. His eyes – Alexander's and yet absolutely not – stared down at me. I gazed back, saying nothing, doing my best to think nothing, waiting to be dismissed.

"Why is she still here?" Alexander's voice cut through the moment as he descended the stairs. I half turned my head to look at him, and Samuel dropped his hand at once. Not fast enough for Alexander's quick eyes to miss it, though. He paused on the bottom step, exuding a deathly calm, but for the snakelike narrowing of his eyes. No one spoke, we were waiting for Alexander.

"Elizabeth," he murmured. "Go."

I went, shouldering past Zane on my way out of the door.

"Four o'clock," he hissed in my ear as I passed.